

The Dynamics of Artistic Appropriation Behind the Iron Curtain

Gabriela ROBECI¹

Abstract: *This paper investigates artistic appropriation occurring in Central-Eastern Europe during socialist regimes, and the variety of exchanges that were possible. To narrow down the search, a focus is placed on three countries, respectively Poland, Hungary, and Romania. Examples of socialist and capitalist symbols from Coca-Cola, sickle and hammer, May 1st, Lenin, and Chernobyl will be considered. Other examples of focus areas are happiness in the East, land art and performances in nature, ancestral heritage, and rituals. The end of the analysis will propose useful terminology that can best describe the act of appropriation from behind the Iron Curtain.*

Keywords: *appropriation; Eastern Europe; land art; performance; rituals; socialist symbols; capitalist symbols;*

Introduction

This research focuses on means of appropriation in artistic creation in Eastern Europe, at a time when half of the countries were located behind the Iron Curtain, thus under the influence of the USSR. Specifically, it investigates art appropriation between 1945 and 1989 in 3 countries from Eastern Europe, Poland, Hungary, and Romania.

The ingenuity of the visual results from the area of interest was prompted by a fascination for art from influential cultural centers. According to cultural researchers, the act of taking and owning cultural habits and rites foreign to someone or foreign to a certain area was coined 'appropriation'. Usually weighted by negative meanings, cultural appropriation can wrongfully be perceived as theft. Narrowing down the field of research a bit more, art appropriation was touched upon. It is a term that refers to the act of owning artistic practices foreign to someone or a certain geographical area, and, once again, it has been wrongfully deemed an act of stealing artistic concepts or techniques.

When seeing the bigger picture, the evolution of culture and visual art, appropriation has always been placed at the core of innovation. While being inspired and owning practices foreign to them, most skilled creators have managed to innovate and bring culture to new levels, up to the point of setting the cornerstones for new trends and movements. From a visual art history point of view, we can generally look at how Egyptian statues inspired Greek Kouroi², which in turn inspired Roman statues, which in their turn inspired Renaissance sculptures and statuary groups. David Evans also compared the act of appropriation in ancient times, referring to the evolution of the Roman Empire's culture and rites³. Art innovation is not possible without

¹ Faculty of Arts and Design, West University of Timișoara, gabriela.robeci@e-uvt.ro.

² „Kouroi” is the plural form of Greek „Kouros”, a term used in art history to refer to the statues created in the Helen islands approximately between the 7th and 5th centuries B.C., easily recognizable due to the specific body proportions and the exophthalmos eyes.

³ David Evans. 2009. „Introduction”. In *Appropriation, Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by David Evans, 194-205. Cambridge: The MIT Press, p. 196.

inspiration created through appropriation. Thus, this paper shall consider the positive aspects of art appropriation and how it led to innovative artistic practices in the East.

This research serves two main purposes. One is to establish if appropriated art can be identified behind the Iron Curtain, either in visual form or in concept. If results are found, specific categories of appropriation will be given, in order to correctly define innovative art creation in Eastern Europe. If no results are found, an overview will be made, referring to what the lack means in the context of the historical period between 1945 and 1989, and how it can be interpreted. If no definitive conclusions can be reached, a proposal for further research will be formulated.

1. Theoretical Framework

Various theoreticians have analyzed and discussed the term ‘appropriation’ and its encompassing meaning in cultural areas and art. Philosophers and art historians have also analyzed the relationship between different kinds of cultures and power dynamics. They have introduced concepts that help the identification of art appropriation in the segmented study area. The most relevant are James Young, David Evans, Arnd Schneider, Walter Benjamin, Guy Debord, H. D. Buchloh, Piotr Piotrowski, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

James Young mentioned that *cultural appropriation* occurs when a globally dominant culture takes over and uses elements from a minoritarian culture, without permission and while producing harm. According to him, appropriation is understood negatively when one dominant culture does not simply borrow from another, but also produces unwanted alterations to the original elements, or when it uses them wrongly, leading to a loss of original value. A less influential culture may suffer when original values are lost or misinterpreted, and when the dominant culture and values take over⁴. However, positive appropriation can be distinguished from negative appropriation, an aspect defined as *innovative* and *non-innovative*⁵ *appropriation*. James Young checks if a person who appropriates elements from someone else’s culture can do so in an innovative way, by creating an authentic piece of heritage, or even by bringing renewed attention to customs and traditions that would have otherwise died out.

In general terms, appropriation refers to the attempt to bridge the divergence between two seemingly unrelated cultural units, creating a connection from which a cultural code with new meanings evolves. The greater the differences, the stronger the attraction to something foreign, sometimes defined by *exoticism*. Appropriation of art has underpinned the curiosity for what others create. "All cultural practices appropriate in their changing expressions what is foreign, exotic, or peripheral, or archaic discursive elements."⁶

The above-mentioned theoreticians have distinguished between a powerful entity and one that absorbs influences and suffers alterations. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak defines such entities as a Subject and a Subaltern⁷. The first is a forceful cultural identity that influences an ample group of individuals. The Subject has a powerful Voice. The second is a local culture, unique to a smaller area of influence, that has suffered little alterations from ancestral times until the present. The latter has not had a powerful Voice in global history. When a Subject clashes with a

⁴ James O. Young. 2008. *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*. New York: Blackwell Publishing, pp. 1-9.

⁵ James O. Young. 2008. *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts*. New York: Blackwell Publishing, p. 36.

⁶ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. 2009. „Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop and Sigmar Polke 1982”. In *Appropriation, Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by David Evans, 178-189. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 178.

⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 2010. „Can the Subaltern Speak?”. In *Reflections on the History of an Idea, Can the Subaltern Speak?*, ed. by Rosalind C. Morris, 484-520. New York: Columbia University Press Kindle E-Book, p. 485.

Subaltern, the first appropriates the Subaltern's cultural elements, more often than not imposing the dominant Subject's culture and altering the Subaltern's. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses these terms when referring to Europe's colonization of Central-Eastern Asia.

Piotr Piotrowski focuses on examples from Eastern Europe. He introduces the term *The Other*⁸ in his horizontal geography theory. Any cultural entity placed on the outskirts of the dominant is called The Other. It represents something foreign, different, even peculiar.

A speaking voice, even that of Subalterns, must be intercepted by Others and the code of the transmitted message must be deciphered. It is the only way in which expressing a point of view can be effective. As Buchloch⁹ noted, if there is no audience to perceive the intended message, appropriation of the message cannot be achieved.

According to Walter Benjamin¹⁰, art appropriation is also done through technology, such as photography or film. Since the object represented through technology loses its original aura, the representation is distinct from the original, hence it is an original piece created through appropriation.

Guy Debord¹¹ introduced the notion of *détournement* by which he identified methods of clandestinely taking words or images dominant in the media and using them to create a new message of disobedience to the original item.

Arnd Schneider offered a new perspective on appropriation when analyzing the evolution of contemporary art in Argentina. He focused his study on visual artists, who incorporated elements from another culture into their works. However, the process was done in an attempt to build their own cultural identity, or due to "*the indigenization of identity*"¹², not out of a desire to create a simulacrum of the original object.

Eastern European countries which were USSR satellites had a more powerful politics and culture imposed upon them. We can consider that the socialist norms, represented the Subject, or the main force that shaped art production. The most alternative and curious members of society had a predisposed curiosity to get access to Western culture. On one hand, there was the thought of continuing the exchanges with the West, that had occurred prior to socialist systems. On the other hand, since capitalist cultural manifestations were banned, or illy-spoken-off in the official socialist discourses, a strong desire was formed to get access to that which was forbidden. The West constituted the 2nd major Subject for this study group. Eastern European countries, in this theory, represent the Subaltern, or the cultural entity that does not have global power, and that has local practices of interest and fascination for the 2 Subjects. In what degree the exchange of artistic ideas between the 2 Subjects and the Subalterns occurred, remains to be verified through examples.

What is particular to the East, from a preliminary investigation, is that the USSR while acting as a forceful colonizer, *de facto* did not colonize its satellites. The Subject's culture did not appropriate the Subaltern's culture and then imposed its own. The USSR directly imposed socialist norms upon the satellites. Another particularity is that satellite countries took bits of socialist principles and appropriated them to suit their message and identity. Furthermore,

⁸ Piotr Piotrowski. 2016. „Nationalizing Modernism: Exhibitions of Hungarian and Czechoslovakian Avant-garde in Warsaw”. In *Art Beyond Borders: Artistic Exchange in Communist Europe (1945-1989)*, ed. by Jérôme Bazin & Pascal Dubourg Glatigny & Piotr Piotrowski, 209-223. Leipzig: Central European University Press, p. 211.

⁹ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh. 2009. „Parody and Appropriation in Francis Picabia, Pop and Sigmar Polke 1982”. In *Appropriation, Whitechapel Documents of Contemporary Art*, ed. by David Evans, 178-189. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 181.

¹⁰ Walter Benjamin. 2008. *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*. Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, pp. 19-54.

¹¹ Guy Debord. 2011. *The Society of the Spectacle [Societatea spectacolului]*. București: Editura RAO, pp. 127-147.

¹² Arnd Schneider. 2006. *Appropriation as Practice: Art and Identity*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 163-170.

satellite countries also sought within, trying to identify and promote a national cultural identity with roots in country-side life, nature, and villages. Lastly, these countries also tried to reach, and appropriate Western principles, trying to keep up the Eastern-Western connection that existed before 1945.

2. Motivation for Art Appropriation in the East

Artistic appropriation occurred out of various motivations. In this study, three levels of motivation were identified, and these led to specific artistic manifestations.

Motivation 1: synchronicity and belonging to the 'Other'

Motivation 2: capturing new influences through unconventional media

Motivation 3: artistic innovation.

The desire for synchronicity and belonging to a global culture represented the beginning stage of art created by appropriating Western concepts. This was sometimes synchronous with a need to not identify with official state art, supported through the official art institutions. The refusal of participation and artistic activity within imposed state limitations, the search for subsidiary options, and the clandestine takeover of cultural symbols meant longing for something else. The manifestation of non-actions, non-interventions, and non-objects-of-art were the unique examples through which Eastern Europeans began to be creative, adapting contemporary Western notions to the immediate reality.

Experimenting with the new happened by trying alternative materials and media. Introducing ready-made objects, plastic, metal, and nylon meant innovating traditional art forms. Avant-garde ideas were continued in the second half of the 20th century, constantly rejecting conformity, norms, and academic practices. What is surprising, is that this did not occur only by distancing art from village traditions. There are examples of art creations that appropriated ancestral, country-side rites, customs, trades, and natural materials. It may seem like a traditionalist approach. But the fact that these were alternatives to the state-imposed socio-realist visuals made them unconventional, and novel.

The most basic motivation for appropriation was artistic innovation per se. Apart from considering whether or not a practice belonged, was synchronous, or experimented with unconventional materials or visual solutions, some artists just wanted to be the other, to do things their way. In the 1980s most satellite countries went through highly restrictive social periods when alternative art practices could not be exhibited in public spaces. Appropriation occurred in private with a personal motivation to express an artistic moment for personal benefit, to stay grounded, and sane, in a society when everything seemed hopeless and pointless.

3. Case studies

3.1. Socialist and Capitalist Symbols

From the 1970s, artists in the East have started to incorporate various symbols, making a comment upon the evolution of society, politics, and power. The use of some visuals criticizes both Socialism and Capitalism. Boris Groys argued that a unique kind of 'pop art' occurred in Moscow, one that combined socialist realist symbols and pop art visuals in what was called *sotsrealism*, or sots art. These artists were placing themselves away from "official cultural production", and they consciously used "eclecticism and delights in the spectacle of antagonistic

semiotic and artistic systems destroying each other”¹³.



Fig. 1. Tamás Szentjóbó, *Coca Cola – Vodka*, 1969¹⁴



Fig. 2. Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Makó Sketches*, 1980¹⁵

Poland, Hungary, and Romania were no exceptions. Coca-Cola, Vodka, and the Socialist Star were symbols used by Tamás Szentjóbó and Sandor Pinczehelyi. In 1969, the first staged a commercial photograph showing the banner with the Coca-Cola logo, a symbol of the most known and desired Western soft drink, and right under the *vodkával* word, referring to the most popular drink in the East (Figure 1). “*Coca-Cola was still more expensive in the region –if it was even accessible at all—than vodka....*”, said Piotr Piotrowski¹⁶. The statement confirms that blending such symbols in an image without doubt created a social commentary on the reality in the East and the utopian vision of access to consumer goods. The second artist staged a still life setting for a set of 3 photos in 1980, showing: a fishing net containing an empty can of Coca-Cola and a red star by a body of water (Figure 2); a net with the items retrieved from the water and pulled to shore, in the grass (Figure 3); the net hung at a bicycle’s handlebar (Figure 4).



¹³ Boris Groys. 1992. *The Total Art of Stalinism, Avant-Garde Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, pp. 10-11.

¹⁴ Szentjóbó Tamás. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <http://www.c3.hu/collection/koncept/images/stauby.html>.

¹⁵ Maja Fowkes & Reuben Fowkes. 2017, September 17. „Eastern Europe Can Be Yours! Alternative Art in the Eighties”. *Afterall*. Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://www.afterall.org/articles/eastern-europe-can-be-yours-alternative-art-of-the-eighties-2/>.

¹⁶ Piotr Piotrowski. 2017. „Why Were There No Great Pop Art Curatorial Projects in Eastern Europe in the 1960s?”. In *Art in Transfer in the Era of Pop*, ed. by Annika Öhrner, 21-37. Stockholm: Södertörn University the Library, p. 33.

Fig. 3. Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Makó Sketches*, 1980¹⁷

Fig. 4. Sándor Pinczehelyi, *Makó Sketches*, 1980¹⁸

The sequence tells us a story of Capitalist and Socialist symbols being found thrown away like trash and rescued and taken home by someone in the Makó village, located a couple of kilometers away from the Romanian border. Symbols of socialism and of power in general were included in photographs or art objects that deconstructed the value of the symbol and reduced it to a utilitarian or a useless tool.



Fig. 5. Ion Bitzan, *The Finery of Useless Things*, 1969-1970¹⁹



Fig. 6. Sándor Pinczehelyi, *The Sickle and Hammer*, 1973²⁰

From 1969 to 1970 the series called *The Finery of Useless Things* (Figure 5) was created by Romanian artist, Ion Bitzan. In wooden cases with soft interior lining brass plates²¹ were displayed as if they represented a valuable medal. Instead of that, one could see abstract symbols created by the artist in such a way that they mimicked socialist symbols, while at the same time looking nothing like any known symbol. The image inside the box displayed an alternative to reality. The work of art, displayed as an object, was represented a contemplation on the "illusion of material security"²².

The sickle and the hammer were used by Sándor Pinczehelyi in 1973 (Figure 6) for a staged photograph bearing an eponymous title. He used the silk-screening technique to create a series of *Sickle and Hammer* prints. The usage of a Western, pop-art technique of multiplication for criticizing a popular icon was transferred to the Eastern European identity. The soviet symbol

¹⁷ Piotr Piotrowski. 2017. „Why Were There No Great Pop Art Curatorial Projects in Eastern Europe in the 1960s?”. In *Art in Transfer in the Era of Pop*, ed. by Annika Öhrner, 21-37. Stockholm: Södertörn University the Library, p. 34.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 37.

¹⁹ Jürgen Harten & Horst Kurnityky. 1974. *Über die seltsame Natur des Geldes in Kunst, Wissenschaft und Leben II*. Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf und Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, p. 87.

²⁰ *Sickle and Hammer – Sándor Pinczehelyi*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://en.mng.hu/artworks/1158/>.

²¹ Iulian Mereuță. 1973. „The Object”. *Arta*, 4: 50-51, p. 50.

²² Jürgen Harten & Horst Kurnityky. 1974. *Über die seltsame Natur des Geldes in Kunst, Wissenschaft und Leben II*. Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle Düsseldorf und Kunstverein für die Rheinlande und Westfalen, p. 87.

turned from a powerful emblem into a group of utilitarian objects held up in the artists' hands. In comparison, one may check the *Sickle and Hammer* silk screening created by Andy Warhol in 1976, after a visit to the artist made in Italy²³. In contrast, Sándor Pinczehelyi's "face is seen through a 'hole' - made of the symbols of socialism, the sickle and the hammer - in which he is completely stuck; this raises the question of whether he identifies with the "punching" political action that obliterates the socialist image, or with the symbolic tools that frame the face of socialism"²⁴.



Fig. 7. Wanda Mihuleac, *The Symbol - The Sickle and Hammer*, 1974²⁵

In 1974, on the outskirts of Bucharest, in a field from Bragadiru commune, Wanda Mihuleac staged an action of building the symbol of the sickle and hammer out of bricks. With the help of friends, the shape was built on soil, on top of grass. The action and installation got registered on 35mm film. The image of workers collaborating and using their bare hands to build a socialist symbol bears the hallmark of a ridicule of state-imposed order. By using the same format, the undermining of authority remained a discreet action, with an encoded message. Since this image was not made public at the time, it did not lose its original innovative character, and the symbol of workers' actions formed the basis of a new image code, of contemporary art, without creating a simulacrum of the original.

²³ *Hammer & Sickle: Interpreting Symbols and Meaning*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://www.warhol.org/lessons/hammer-and-sickle/>.

²⁴ Edit András. 2018. „Privát közvéleményből a közös magánvéleménybe - Képzeletbeli határátlépések”. In *Művészet Magyarországon 1956 –1980 Túl a kettősbeszédén*, ed. by Edit Sasvári & Sándor Hornyik & Turai Hedvig, 229-249. Budapest: Vince Kiadó, p. 245.

²⁵ Wanda Mihuleac. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://www.wanda-mihuleac.com/>.



Fig. 8. *Dóra Maurer, May 1st, 1971*²⁶

Apart from icons, artists also used the symbol of socialist public manifestations in innovative artistic creations. One such example is Dóra Maurer's *May 1st*. Even though it referenced a public event with mass demonstrations, parades, and make-pretend joyfulness, Dóra Maurer exhibited quite the opposite of what that day meant. It was compulsory for workers to attend May 1st parades and to sing, chant, or display banners that showed how happy they were with socialist systems. The artist created a small installation in the privacy of her home. From a technical point of view, it represented an experimental printing technique, named *pedotype*²⁷. This meant that a base structure made of wood fiber, wood glue, and paper mache was laid on the floor and imprinted by the repeated path made by Dóra Maurer's feet embedded in red paint. The movement is circular, repeated, and endless. It resembled the walk in a prison cell, as András Edit pointed out²⁸.

Bálint Szombathy was a bit more daring in 1972 during a May 1st parade. He joined the official crowds as the groups were leaving the procession while holding a banner with Lenin. According to Maja Fowkes, this more daring and open attitude is due to the artist coming from Yugoslavia, the Vojvodina, a Hungarian-speaking Minority²⁹. Yugoslavia did not experience a historical moment of revolt with a violent USSR intervention, as Hungary did in 1956. Given the differences in socialist direction, Yugoslavians experienced greater artistic freedoms and were more open about their public art displays. The daring approach is pointed out by András Edit as well. She mentions how the value of a socialist symbol, such as Lenin, is disconfirmed and questioned, with the banner being held with the back facing the crowd (Figure 9), or in such a way that Lenin's bald head formed a nimble behind Bálint Szombathy's head (Figure 10)³⁰.

²⁶ Edit András. 2018. „Privát közvéleményből a közös magánvéleménybe - Képzletbeli határátlépések”. In *Művészet Magyarországon 1956–1980 Túl a kettősbeszédén*, ed. by Edit Sasvári & Sándor Hornyik & Turai Hedvig: 229-249. Budapest: Vince Kiadó, p. 245.

²⁷ Emese Revesz. 2018. „On Mark-Making, Dóra Maurer's Systemic Alchemy and Kinetic Captures”. *Celebrating Print* 4 (1-2): 20-39, p. 39.

²⁸ Edit András, *op. cit.*, p. 243.

²⁹ Maja Fowkes. 2014. „Off the Record: Performative Practices in the Neo-avant-garde and their Resonances in Contemporary Art”. *Centropa* 14 (1): 57-71, p. 67.

³⁰ Edit András, *op. cit.*, p. 244.



Fig. 9. *Bálint Szombathy, Lenin in Budapest, 1972*³¹



Fig. 10. *Bálint Szombathy, Lenin in Budapest, 1972*³²

3.2. Happiness

Being happy is an important theme both in Western and Socialist societies. In both contexts, it is assumed that people are happy as they are offered everything they could ever wish for. While contesting happiness by default is possible in capitalist societies, in totalitarian-socialist countries such an act can have serious consequences. Yet, some have ventured on the path of unmasking state-imposed happiness, through irony.

Polish alternative theater group called *Akademia Ruchu*, did just that in 1976, with the action *Happy Day* (Figure 10). On the *Kakowskie Przedmieście* Street in Warsaw³³, on a rainy, cold, and un-eventful day, the actors got dressed in brightly colored clothes and started crossing the street repeatedly, blending in the crowds, while also standing out. They displayed unusual happiness, in stark contrast with the bleak attitude and appearance of regular passer-byes. One actress wore a bride's gown, another held a vividly colored flower bouche. Pushing things further, the recorded action was edited with the upbeat rhythm of Vivaldi's *Seasons* in the background. The entire piece was a social commentary that the public witnessed first-hand, and even was a part of, without even knowing about their involvement.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 245.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Akademia Ruchu - Happy Day*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/akademia-ruchu-happy-day>.



Fig. 11. Akademia Ruchu, *Happy Day*, 1976³⁴

One Romanian artist made a social commentary on joyfulness with art objects. *The Box with Sunny Days* (Figure 11) from 1978 looked like a black box that had survived a plane crash. The metal container's side, smeared with dark blue paint, showed an inscription with red letters with the title, signature, and year. The whole appearance of the object was an antithesis of the written message. No sunny days can be imagined when looking at the box.

Several years later, the theme was pushed further with *Chernobyl Souvenir* (Figure 12). An easel displayed a stone slab instead of a canvas. The image on the stone was a warning sign added to radioactive materials. A black mourning cloth at the top of the slab gave the impression of a monument commemorating tragedy. However, like the work mentioned above, the irony was inserted by the legible words: *SOUVENIR, CHERNOBYL, 26 APRIL 1986*.

³⁴ Akademia Ruchu *Happy Day*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://artmuseum.pl/en/filmoteka/praca/akademia-ruchu-happy-day>.



Fig. 12. Ion Bitzan, *The Box with Sunny Days*, 1978³⁵



Fig. 13. Ion Bitzan, *Souvenir – Chernobyl*, 1986³⁶

No list of ironic happiness under socialism is possible without a mention of Endre Tót's *Joy Series*. Klara Kemp-Welch analyzed the protest disguised as a series of joys in several of Endre Tót's creations³⁷. One important point is made of the artist's choices. A painter by profession, he gave up the easel, and created conceptual photographs, that bear titles starting with *I Am Glad if I Can...* followed by mentions with double meaning, like 'I am glad to write zeros', or 'I am glad to look at something beautiful'.

The soviet star, red, and public monuments were socialist symbols used to show subversion in his series. Pieces such as 'I am glad to look at the wall', 'I am glad to look to the right', 'I am glad to look to the left', 'I look right – right rain', and 'I look left – left rain' are a social commentary at the existence of the socialist man behind the Iron Curtain, and the possibility of being 'happy' when observing left-winged or right-winged politics. To push things further, all the titles were written in English. Not only did the artist abandon his trade, painting, for a new technique better suited for his conceptualism, but he also gave up his mother tongue for a Western language of global circulation.

A particular joy is *I am glad if I can read the newspaper* shows Endre Tót smiling through a hole in the center of the paper. One interpretation of this was made by Klara Kemp-Welch³⁸ who observed the pointless messages from printed sources, that were embedded with pointless state ideology and propaganda. A different interpretation made by Edit András³⁹ linked the newspaper with a hole in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution flag.

3.3. The Land and Ancestral Heritage

Land art as it is known under Western standards is a monumental intervention in the landscape, one that marks the presence of humans in the natural surroundings, usually for a

³⁵ *The Box with Sunny Days [Cutia cu zile însorite]*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://www.ionbitzan.com/catalogue/entry.php?id=1280>.

³⁶ *Souvenir - Chernobil*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://www.ionbitzan.com/catalogue/entry.php?id=1164>.

³⁷ Klara Kemp Welch. „Affirmation and Irony in Endre Tót's Joy Works of the 1970s”. In *Art History & Criticism 3, Art and Politics: Case-Studies from Eastern Europe*, ed. by L. Dovydaityte, 136-144. Krakow: Vytautas Magnus, p. 140.

³⁸ Klara Kemp Welch. „Affirmation and Irony in Endre Tót's Joy Works of the 1970s”. In *Art History & Criticism 3, Art and Politics: Case-Studies from Eastern Europe*, ed. by L. Dovydaityte, 136-144. Krakow: Vytautas Magnus, p. 141.

³⁹ Edit András, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

noticeable amount of time. In Eastern Europe, land art was not an innate style, but one that reached those interested in the natural medium, and it was accepted and altered to meet local aesthetics and personal concepts. One key particularity of the Western–Eastern difference, is that land art behind the Iron Curtain had more to do with a temporal mark in the landscape, sometimes referring to a body’s action in the surroundings, and did not consider changing the aspects of a given place for a noticeable amount of time.



Fig. 14. Endre Tót, *I am glad if I can read a newspaper*, 1973⁴⁰



Fig. 15. Károly Halász, *In the Memory of Robert Smithson*, 1973⁴¹

If we check, for example, Hungarian artist Halász Károly’s outdoor manifestations, these fell in between the aesthetics of Western and Eastern land art. A piece from 1973 called *In the Memory of Robert Smithson* meant a photo recording of actions in the landscape. A spiral was traced in the sand, on the banks of the Danube River. Ripped paper was added to the indentation and set on fire. 1973 was the year of Robert Smithson’s death, and the spiral traced on the shores of the Danube was a funeral pyre, an homage to the great American artist. What is worth pointing out, is that Halász Károly and Robert Smithson were in contact, exchanging letters and information about art, which means that this Eastern jetty is particularly valuable in the artists’ connection.

Wanda Gołkowska, an artist from Poland, had a different approach to land art. In 1972 she had a project of *Earth Collection*. This meant that she collected sample soils of different kinds and created an art piece that listed the word ‘earth’ in different languages, defining their particularities and showing sample soils as a reference. The 1972 collection was realized at the Osieki Symposium, a meeting place for contemporary Polish artists far away from the official surveillance from cities. Photographic documentation of this artwork from Osieki was sent to Sweden as mail art, where Paolo Barille was exhibiting the collective notion of earth around the world. 2 years later he continued the project under the title *Messagio Terrae*, and invited Wanda Gołkowska to send not documentation, but actual samples of earth.

⁴⁰ Image from the author’s personal archive, from the exhibition in Timișoara at the 2017 *Art Encounters Biennial*.

⁴¹ Károly Halász. 2010. *Private Transmissions / Photoworks 1971 – 79*. Budapest: Vintage Galéria, p. 22.



Fig. 16. Wanda Gołkowska, *Messagio Terrae*, 1974⁴²



Fig. 17. Wanda Mihuleac, *Messagio Terra*, 1974⁴³

The Polish artist was not the only one invited to this Italian earth-collecting project. Among many others, a Romanian artist called Wanda Mihuleac was also invited to send earth samples to Italy. She turned the collection into an artistic ritual, that suggested an offering to Mother Nature, including a round mirror, a pile of soil, paper, and fire. Wanda Mihuleac's interest in art in nature was present throughout the early part of her career. In 1980 she created a series of plans under the umbrella title *Ecological Project – For Co-Presence* (Figure 18). These plans for land intervention included dome structures that would have been made out of reinforced concrete, with a waterproofing membrane, so that they could be then covered in vegetation. On top, water would have been added in a convex roof, in order to form mirrored surfaces, linking the sky to the green grass and earth. Though never realized, these plans for land art showed Wanda Mihuleac's interest in this kind of art. In Northern Romania, one year after Wanda Gołkowska's earth collection, Mihai Olos created a land intervention marked by man's action in the environment, entitled *Earth*. Though local artworks were created, a critic confirmed that the pieces were of global importance⁴⁴. Firstly, he dug out patches of grass from the side of a hill, cutting them as if they were building blocks⁴⁵. Once the perimeter was cleared of vegetation, and the greenery got stored to the side, the marked area was excavated with a shovel. The inner layer of the trench was then patched with the green blocks that were taken out to begin with. Mihai Olos, an artist who grew up in the villages in Northern Romania, very fondly learning traditional wood carving techniques, created artworks that were at the border between actions, interventions, sculpture, and land art. Being very much involved in the local and international art

⁴² Jolanta Studzińska. 2017. *Rysuję litery myśli – Składam w pojęcia Otwieram inne ścieżki, Wanda Gołkowska*. Wrocław: Fundacja Dla Sztuki Niezidentyfikowanej, p. 33.

⁴³ Wanda Mihuleac. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://www.wanda-mihuleac.com/>.

⁴⁴ Gheorghe Vida. 1978. „Ambient Art in Romania [Arta ambientală în România]”. *SCIA*, 25: 175-190, p. 181.

⁴⁵ József Bárdosi. 1993. „Turning Structure into Myth - On the Sculptures of Mihai Olos”. In *Mihai Olos*, ed. by Nagy Géza, 10-11. Vác: Workshop of Vác, p. 10.

scene, he got to travel to Germany, where he spoke with Joseph Beuys about his art projects, and co-taught a seminary⁴⁶.

We could see in the examples above that there was both a Western influence and a local interest in land art. The Western influence was either direct, like the direct contact between Károly Halász and Robert Smithson, Wanda Gołkowska and Paolo Barrilo, Mihai Olos and Joseph Beuys, or indirect like the link formed between the participants to a joint project like Wanda Gołkowska⁴⁷ and Wanda Mihuleac.



Fig. 18. Wanda Mihuleac, *Ecological Project – For Co-Presence*, 1980⁴⁸



Fig. 19. Ana Lupas, *Solemn Process*, 1964⁴⁹

3.4. Performances and Rites

Land art, or art in nature was brought closer to a local identity when traditional object-making customs were used in contemporary art pieces. The rituals from countryside life were brought into visual practices for contemporary art. *The Solemn Process - August Wreaths* (Figure 18) was created in 1964, in two series, the artwork comprised gigantic wheat wreaths. Made through traditional hay weaving techniques, they were planned by the artist but executed by the women from two villages in an area named Calat County in the Middle Ages, a part of the much wider region of Transylvania, which is now just an informal title for an area in Cluj County. What is particular about the area is that it has been inhabited by a Hungarian-speaking minority, thus with unique culture and rites. At the end of August, when the wheat would be harvested, the

⁴⁶ Gheorghe Vida. 1978. „Ambient Art in Romania” [„Arta ambientală în România”]. *SCIA*, 25: 175.

⁴⁷ With a different project, Wanda Gołkowska got in direct contact with artists from Bucharest, and she even visited Romanian workshops. But, out of her memoirs, a direct contact with Ion Bitzan is proven, with no reference of ever contacting Wanda Mihuleac, though, for a brief time, they frequented the same circles.

⁴⁸ Photo from the author’s personal archive, taken at the *Wanda Mihuleac Contextualizations* exhibition at MNAC, București, 2018.

⁴⁹ *Ana Lupas Drawing the Solemn Process*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://www.lespressesdureel.com/EN/ouvrage.php?id=9062&menu=4>.

last strains of wheat would be collected and embroidered into hay sculptures called *buzakoszoru*⁵⁰. These would then be hung in the local Reformat churches and blessed through religious rituals, asking for another fruitful harvest in the following year. Ana Lupaş changed the structure of the initial wreaths and designed gigantic bell, mace, and wedge shapes. However, these still bore the original mysticism of the hay sculptures. Cornel Radu Constantinescu wrote in *Contemporanul* about the act of restoring history⁵¹ through Ana Lupaş's creation. Not only did she investigate her own local tradition, but she also used it as a point of inspiration for visual innovation.

Western-centric art history bore little attention to art created by Others, outside of the most powerful and influential cultural centers. In recent years, namely after the 2000s, more attention has been given to art created in the margins. It took approximately 50 years for the *Solemn Process* installation by Ana Lupaş to be integrated into the Tate Modern collection. The work has been included in the category of Eastern European art, without mentioning the original significance of the interweaving of the wreaths of wheat, typical of the artist's native region. Thus, the first step for the existence of an Other to be authenticated by a dominant Power is to be assimilated. When the *Solemn Process* was acquired by Tate, the wreaths were encased in metal containers. The aesthetics, presence, and smell of the August sculptures were temporary. In the present, only photographic documentation can recall the original presence of the work.

The next examples from Poland, resurfaced Slavic rituals that still survived in small villages, despite the massive industrialization and population migration from the countryside to the cities prompted the socialist regimes.

Polish artist Maria Pinińska-Bereś delved deeper into the symbolism of the female presence as an element of nature's fecundity in the action *Praying for Rain* from 1977. Sitting in the grass, she enclosed the space with stones, describing the line of a circle. Then she took her signature pink flags and stuck their poles in front of each stone. The circumference of the circle was then cleared of grass, leaving only a disc of earth. The rain-bringing rituals of ancient Slavonic civilizations have been preserved in the villages of Eastern Europe but have rarely been documented (We can recall her more famous documentations of Slavonic rituals preserved through the Balkan Baroque project by Marina Abramovič). Pagan traditions survived even in the context of the Catholic faith, making the rural world more mystical and rooted in the past than it was aware. The artist, like many others in the 1970s and 1980s, discovered a local authenticity to rural customs, which she addressed through action. For her reinvention of the rain ritual, she sat in the center of the circle, keeping her face and palms pointed skywards, sticking her bare feet to the ground. The transfer of natural energy from the sky to the ground was suggested through the artist's body arranged in a zone of magical inspiration. The bare feet were a thorough detail in her visual experimentation, they expressed cleanliness and care for a particular sacred place.

⁵⁰ Nicolae Bot. 1989. *Wedding Songs [Căntece de nuntă]*. Bucureşti: Minerva, p. 7.

⁵¹ Cornel Radu Constantinescu. 1991. „The Fugue Point” [„Punctul de fugă”]. *Contemporanul*, 23: 2-6, p. 3.



Fig. 20. Maria Pinińska-Bereś, *Praying for Rain*, 1977⁵²

Maria Pinińska-Bereś completed her university studies at the Cracow Academy of Art in 1956, working in the artistic environment connected with the Cracow Group and the Kristofory Café. As a part of this environment, she observed the new artistic theories and directions being circulated. The stenographic environments and happenings created by Tadeusz Kantor were a point of contact⁵³ with a form of artistic manifestation that put the body and the identity of the artist in the foreground. This fact helped in the shaping of subjects relevant to her identity as an artist. It is interesting to see how this artist, who did not travel outside Poland⁵⁴, still managed to create art with global values, responding to the international directions in which visual representation was heading.

A ritualic procession was developed by Władysław Hasiór into a demonstration in the village of Łąck, on the occasion of *the Apple Blossom Festival* on 13 May⁵⁵. The artist created banners that were similar in design to Christian banners that were used in processions. However, on each surface, he included his own visual references and stylistics. Dressed in military clothes, the artist with a group of collaborators marched through the village, being confused by locals with officials displaying a regular representation. Carrying banners in a procession was intended to bring contemporary art closer to an audience that would have had little chance to go to museums or galleries⁵⁶. The action itself was designed to include folk music and drumming, making its perception in the rural setting natural. The nature of some banners came from their source of inspiration, medieval war flags, battle banners or banners from funeral processions. If initially they were created out of a desire to parody socialist processions with inscribed messages

⁵² Maria Pininska Beres *Praying for Rain*. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/maria-pininska-beres-praying-for-rain-pradnik-estate-krakow-summer-1977>.

⁵³ Agata Jakubowska argued that Maria Pinińska-Bereś's participation in Tadeusz Kantor's actions such as *Sea Happening* influenced her to use the subject of the corset in her work and to experiment privately with the medium of the actions, recorded photographically.

⁵⁴ Agata Jakubowska. 2014. „Ambiguous Liberation: The Early Works of Maria Pinińska-Bereś”. *Journal of Art History [Konsthistorisk tidskrift]* 83 (2): 168-182, p. 170.

⁵⁵ Marek Jaworski & Julita Dembowska. 2021. „O sztandarach i teatralności Hasióra / About Hasiór's banners and theatricality”. *Teatr Lalek*, 2-3: 5-10, p. 5.

⁵⁶ Grzegorz Dubowski. 1973. *Wernisaż wśród jabłoni*. [Video] 3:52-4:02, Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AjJF278SYNo&t=185s>.

that did not fit the context of the people's lived reality, they were developed into unique creations that could creatively display the defining elements of Władysław Hasiór's art.



Fig. 21. Władysław Hasiór, *The Festival of Apple Blossoms*, 1973⁵⁷

In general, he inserted little ironies into his actions by his chosen double reference. In the case of *the Apple Blossom Celebration*, he deliberately chose a topic relevant to Polish society, referring to the public demonstrations on 1 May. Although the criticism was not obvious, contemplation could also raise questions.

4. Conclusions

The art studies extracted from the vast creations from Poland, Hungary, and Romania during the socialist period bring to attention the themes of socialist and capitalist symbols, happiness, the land and ancestral heritage, and performances and rites. These show what kind of interests the artists had, and, with the aid of the concept, what motivated their creation.

The socialist symbols of vodka, medals, the sickle and the hammer, May 1st and Lenin, and the Coca-Cola capitalist symbol showed how artists behind the curtain exhibited visual solutions in line both with the Western trends at the time, and symbols worthwhile for their realities. The pop art stylistics of Tamás Szentjóbby's *Coca Cola – Vodka* and Sándor Pinczehelyi's *Makó Sketches* were backed up by social commentaries relevant to the local context. Since pop elements were introduced in a geo-political area where criticizing the art market had no relevance, only through appropriation and adaptation was the stylistic changed into something worthwhile in the East. The criticism addressed the Cold War between two powerful entities, that affected the lives of the Others with witty and playful imagery. Artists from outside dominant cultures took elements from the big powers that were engulfing them, and appropriated these in new forms of representation, both being innovative, and critical. The act of appropriation occurred from the Subaltern towards the Subject; thus, we can say, from the bottom up. Appropriation was not out of desire to belong to one of the Subjects but to reach the entities of power indirectly, through social commentaries seen by other Subalterns. The term self-colonization is usually used to refer to less influential cultures appropriating dominant cultural elements. However, self-colonization is done out of a desire to identify with the

⁵⁷ Władysław Hasiór. (n.d.). Retrieved May 9, 2024, from <https://imgur.com/2gIrScl>.

dominant culture. In the given context, the motivation was different. Thus, such a form of cultural dynamics will henceforth be called subcultural appropriation.

The socialist symbols of power were merely exhibited in visual art through Ion Bitzan's *Finery of Useless Things*, Sándor Pinczehelyi's and Wanda Mihuleac's *Sickle and Hammer*. Elements foreign to the art world were taken from their original context, and using the same stylistics as the original, were brought into new context. With no additional details given about the context, the public tends to guess the subversive underlying context of such artworks. Simply seeing symbols of socialist power out of their official discourse emphasizing an act of undervaluing. Once symbols with social functions, the medal and the sickle with hammer become elements with different functions.

The demonstration and parade were taken from their original socialist context and moved to a private artistic manifestation by Dóra Maurer through her *May 1st* piece, and to a boycott of an official public manifestation by Bálint Szombathy, through *Lenin in Budapest*, 1972. The act of 'stealing' or 'borrowing' from elements from the dominant culture is proof of appropriation. The fact that the meanings were enhanced and refined through new visuals proved the qualitative act of this kind of appropriation. These examples also fall under the category of subcultural appropriation.

Happiness is a feeling that should come naturally. It should be a state of mind that has nothing to do with culture or power. However, the extent to which happiness was expected from people, gives hints of underlying problems. Akademia Ruchu's *Happy Day*, Ion Bitzan's *Box with Sunny Days* and *Souvenir – Chernobyl*, and Endre Tót's *I am glad if I can read a newspaper* extract an element from society and turn it into a hoax. Irony brings innovation to the symbol of happiness. From the bottom of cultural influence, up to the dominant culture's discourse, appropriation is present in a subcultural manner.

Though it was considered that artists in Eastern Europe were literally blocked by the Wall, and had all their ties severed with other areas, that is a myth disproven by evidence. However, there is a reason for the myth. The artists who graduated in the 1960s or 1970s experienced more active participation in international events, initially within the satellite countries of the USSR, and later throughout the world. They are the ones who point out that living Behind the Wall did not mean losing all connections with the outside world, and these are the ones who appropriated artistic elements more directly. However, those who became active in the art world in the late 1970s and 1980s felt constrained in their ability to access information and distribute their own ideas. As the systems became more radical, access to information was more limited, leading to the perception that artists were isolated in the East, falling behind the popular international art trends.

The first generation of artists were inspired by art from satellite countries, which in turn were inspired by Western ideals. This is a kind of second-source art appropriation. For those few artists who did come in direct contact with Western examples, such as Ion Bitzan, Halász Károly, Wanda Mihuleac, Mihai Olos, Ana Lupaș, Władysław Hasior, and many others, art appropriation could occur more directly, through first-source art appropriation.

The second generation of artists did not have access to Western art mediated by socialist satellites and limited access to Western examples. Innovative approaches were done with an ideal Western source in mind, which made the examples more unique. Information was usually coming from third-hand sources. Thus, we can call this kind of influence third-source art appropriation.

Since Károly Halász's *In the Memory of Robert Smithson*, Wanda Gołkowska's and Wanda Mihuleac's *Messagio Terrae* were created with direct first-source examples, these are still examples of what we can call subcultural appropriation. However, Wanda Mihuleac's *Ecological Project – For Co-Presence*, and Mihai Olos's *Earth* were original pieces created through the mediation of art examples from other socialist systems. Through collaboration, artists located more Eastern than others received influences from their slightly more Western peers, which also felt Behind the Iron Curtain. This can be called intercultural appropriation.

Intercultural appropriation is more difficult to observe by simply looking at artworks. This means of artistic enrichment has been exercised involuntarily, by taking note of the arts practiced in satellite countries that are more liberal in their social policy than the countries of reference. From East to Central Europe, one can see how the innovations of textile and object art in Romania were mediated by access to biennials, exhibitions, catalogs, and artistic meetings in Hungary, Poland, and later France, Germany and England or America. Alternative practices in Hungary were mediated by access to German-language cultural information sources from Austria, the German-speaking regions of Poland or Germany. In the case of Poland, mediation was through German and French sources, and sometimes English sources. Intercultural appropriation happened discreetly through access to sources and observation, and artists who were able to travel more or took part in mail art interactions were more likely to pick up visual solutions from neighbors in the socialist space when supra-cultural appropriation was not possible.

Local heritage, customs, and rituals were the basis of the last series of artistic examples from this study. The elements of culture were coming from within local and personal history, even though some traditions might have been lost throughout the years. Thus, artists managed to reconnect with their ancestry and found sources of appropriation within. Ana Lupaș's *Solemn Process*, Maria Pinińska-Bereś's *Praying for Rain*, and Władysław Hasior's *Festival of Apple Blossoms* are examples of what can be called intracultural appropriation because influences are found within one's own forgotten cultural heritage.

The politics of the former socialist countries created a unique society in which freedom of rights and freedom of thought and ideas were limited to the general interest of the common people, summed up in an entity called the socialist state. Paradoxically, socialism and communism were created with the ordinary person in mind, in theory attempting to bring justice to the lower class, so much abused throughout human history by the upper class. The result was on the opposite spectrum of the original desire, idealizing the New Socialist-Communist Man, the Worker, to such a degree that anything other than that was considered undesirable. Fear of being politically swallowed up by the dreaded capitalism shaped socialist culture and society, and any instance of nonconformity was thought to bring about the downfall of this utopian system. Therefore, even though equality of all people and equality of opportunity were part of state policies, they were interpreted and adapted according to the will of the ruling apparatus. Visual art had been fighting for equality long before the implementation of socialism, through avant-garde. Elegant academic art, petrified by its repetitive and limited examples of what art should be, found its strongest critic in the alternative practices of the avant-garde. Though it started small, desiring diversity of acceptable brushwork and pictorial or sculptural subjects, this idea evolved in the neo-avant-garde period into acceptance of any form of manifestation as art. The struggle for all artistic ideas to be recognized as worthy in the public eye and the official context of art institutions brought notions of equality and freedom of expression. Who would have benefited from such ideals more than the generations of the 1970s and 1980s in socialist

countries, tired of empty promises of revolution and disillusioned by the lack of a truly accepting system? If the generations of artists of the 1950s and 1960s had some hope that socialism would improve their condition and reinvigorate social conduct, the next two decades brought generations utterly disillusioned by a failed dream of change and willing to turn a blind eye to Western influences in the hope of real improvement. Therefore, it is more common to find examples of subcultural art appropriation of Western and Socialist visuals, concepts, and forms during the 1950s and 1960s. It is more possible to observe examples of intercultural and intracultural appropriation during the 1970s and 1980s, when artists found inspiration from their peers, other satellite states, or within their own culture, by delving deep into ancestral, and local customs.

In conclusion, the art studies indeed showed examples of appropriation. Not only was there an act of appropriation identified, but the particularities of it were pointed out. The symbiosis between dedicated theory and local analysis helped with the establishment of three new categories of appropriation, subcultural, intercultural, and intracultural, done in three waves, through first-hand, second-hand, and third-hand sources.

Thus, Subcultural Appropriation refers to the moment the Subaltern appropriates the culture of the Subject, not out of a desire to belong, but out of a desire to seek one's personal identity in the given context.

Intercultural Appropriation is when the Subalterns appropriate culture from the same position of power, between themselves, creating interconnections and interrelations. The exchange of cultural and artistic elements is mutually beneficial, and the function of the elements is mostly the same or the alterations produce no significant disruption to the initial culture.

Intracultural Appropriation is when the Subaltern seeks within and appropriates national, or local cultures, traditions, and materials, that were forgotten during forced industrialization, when many people left their village life for city life. Coming in closer contact with traditional elements, taking those and using them in contemporary art was motivated by the same desire to establish one's unique identity. The fruitful results showed how "*the indigenization of identity*"⁵⁸ was possible through appropriation.

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